

This Is Your Priest on Drugs

Dozens of religious leaders experienced magic mushrooms in a university study. Many are now evangelists for psychedelics.

By Michael Pollan

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In October, 2015, Hunt Priest, then a minister at Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Mercer Island, in Washington State, was flipping through *The Christian Century*, a progressive Protestant magazine, when an advertisement caught his eye: “Seeking Clergy to Take Part in a Research Study of Psilocybin and Sacred Experience.” Psilocybin is a hallucinogenic compound found in certain mushrooms; researchers at Johns Hopkins University and N.Y.U. wanted to administer it to religious leaders who had “an interest in further exploring and developing their spiritual lives.”

Priest, a slight, bearded, and disarmingly open man from small-town Kentucky, grew up in a Protestant churchgoing family and felt a religious calling as a teen-ager. He went to work for Delta Air Lines, but he told me that, in his thirties, “I began to feel something was missing in my spiritual life.” He started reading Buddhist texts, including Thích

Nhát Hạnh’s “Living Buddha, Living Christ,” which eventually steered him back toward Christianity. At thirty-seven, he entered seminary.

By the time Priest saw the ad, he was burned out. He ministered to an affluent bedroom community near Seattle and felt that his work had become “more about institutional administration and maintenance. That will wrench the spirituality out of most people.” He had never experienced psychedelics—a requirement for participation in the study—and had heard some horror stories. Still, he had always been curious. The study was at respected universities, and legal. *Why the hell would I not do this?* he thought. He began the arduous process of qualifying to participate: a series of phone calls, long questionnaires, in-person interviews in Baltimore, and a medical exam.

The team behind the ad included Roland Griffiths and William Richards, Hopkins scholars who had contributed to the so-called renaissance of psychedelic research, which began around the turn of the millennium. Griffiths, a psychopharmacologist, first became interested in psychedelics after he had a mystical experience while meditating. That day, he encountered “something way, way beyond a material world view that I can’t really talk to my colleagues about, because it involves metaphors or assumptions that I’m really uncomfortable with as a scientist,” he told me in 2014. His most influential research focussed on therapeutic applications of psychedelics. In a 2016 paper published in

the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, Griffiths, Richards, and several other scientists reported that psilocybin could help treat fear and anxiety in cancer patients; the study has been cited more than a thousand times. Numerous clinical trials of psilocybin, MDMA, and other psychedelics followed.

I first encountered the small community of psychedelic researchers while writing about the cancer study for this magazine. I met many more when I wrote a book about their work, and since then I've argued that psychedelics have the potential to treat mental illness and teach us about the mind. In 2020, I helped establish a psychedelic research center at U.C. Berkeley and, after I learned that Griffiths was dying of cancer, I donated to a new chaired professorship that he considered a part of his legacy.

Along the way, I learned that in 2012 Richards and Anthony Bossis, a clinical psychologist at N.Y.U., had started discussing psychedelics and religion. "To me, these experiences can be spiritual," Bossis told me, when we met in his Manhattan office. The researchers set out to answer several questions. Would psychedelic experiences enhance the well-being and vocation of religious leaders, as compared with study participants in a control group who were still waiting for a session? Would the experience renew their faith, or make them question it?

The group secured financial support from several major funders in the psychedelic world, including T. Cody Swift, a philanthropist who has a master's degree in existential-phenomenological psychology, and Carey and Claudia Turnbull, who have funded studies and invested in companies that are pursuing psychedelic medical treatments. Swift and Claudia Turnbull both went on to participate in the research—Swift by interviewing participants and writing a narrative account of their sessions, and Turnbull by facilitating sessions at Johns Hopkins.

Priest was ultimately accepted into the study, alongside about thirty other religious leaders, including a Catholic priest, a Baptist Biblical scholar, several rabbis, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. (The joke about walking into a bar almost writes itself.) Priest was one of four Episcopalians. The final sample, like the demographics of the study team, skewed white (ninety-seven per cent), Christian (seventy-six per cent), and male (sixty-nine per cent). Recruitment, through ads and direct outreach to religious communities, proved difficult, especially for religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism; religious proscriptions against mind-altering substances may have played a role. Finding willing rabbis, however, was easy—the challenge was finding ones who were “psychedelically naïve.”

Scientifically speaking, the study had serious limitations, many of them acknowledged by its authors. The sample was small, self-selecting, and

unrepresentative, several faiths were not included, and there was no placebo control. “Expectancy effects” can also have a profound impact on psychedelic research, and a case can be made that participants were primed to have a certain kind of experience. On questionnaires filled out months after their sessions, for example, participants were asked about their “sacred experience.” Andrew Gelman, a statistician at Columbia who is an expert on study design, read a draft of the paper that resulted from the study and told me in an e-mail, “I guess the punch line is that if you enroll people in a study and tell them they’re gonna have a sacred experience, then some people will have a sacred experience.” Zac Kamenetz, a Berkeley-based rabbi who participated in the study, also told me that the language used by some researchers, as well as the music played during sessions (the playlist included Enya, a Christmas choral work, “Om Namah Shivaya,” and lots of Bach), betrayed a distinctly Christian slant.

As an odd sort of ethnography, though, the study tells a provocative story. It’s not often that a group of clergy members recount a high-dose psilocybin trip. Would people steeped in theology and religious practice offer uniquely informed or nuanced accounts of mystical experiences? Would they encounter imagery or symbolism from their faiths—or might their experiences point to something more universal, a common core shared by all religions? Among participants who had two sessions, the researchers found that a striking number—seventy-nine per

cent—reported that the experience had enriched their prayer, their effectiveness in their vocation, and their sense of the sacred in daily life. Ninety-six per cent rated their first encounters with psilocybin as being among the top five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

Perhaps the most intriguing question went unmentioned in the scientific paper, although it came to mind for many study participants. At a time when organized religion has been struggling with declining membership, especially among the young, could carefully prepared and guided psychedelic experiences—whether for clergy or for members of their congregations—have the potential to spark a revival of interest in religion? This is a controversial idea, so I was surprised to hear Priest and several other participants say that they believed they could. Most of the researchers were more circumspect, but Richards—an infectiously cheerful clinical psychologist who is now in his eighties—was happy to entertain the possibility. Before Richards completed a Ph.D. in counselling, he earned master's degrees in divinity and theology. Psychedelics “can give new life to the dogma, by helping people understand where the dogma came from,” he told me at his home, in West Baltimore. “One way to look at psychedelics is as revelation happening in the present.” Then, perhaps mindful of the potential for religious or scientific backlash, he added, “Let’s not frighten the horses!”

Richards's convictions, and his aspirations for psychedelics, prompt questions about the objectivity of such research. Rick Strassman, a psychiatrist at the University of New Mexico who conducted psychedelic research in the early nineties, suggested to me that at least some of the researchers came to the study with "a mission" to demonstrate the spiritual and psychological value of psilocybin. He pointed to the risk of selection bias: those who volunteer are likely to be "spiritually hungering for a mystical experience," which increases the chance that they will have one. "I would not think that a stodgy Talmudic scholar would want to participate," he told me. "For them, it's the word and the law. Spiritual experience alone is not that important." In 2020, Matthew Johnson, a Johns Hopkins researcher and a co-author of the religious-leaders study, made similar warnings in an article titled "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine." He wrote of "scientists and clinicians imposing their personal religious or spiritual beliefs on the practice of psychedelic medicine."

"I can do this the quick way or the dun-dun, dun-dun, dun-dun way."

Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

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When Priest stepped into the psychedelic-session room at Johns Hopkins, he felt both excited and anxious. The vibe of the space was more living room than clinic; it had a cozy couch for participants to lie on, vaguely spiritual-looking art work on the walls, and a small statue of the Buddha on a bookshelf. Richards, who has a wide, toothy grin, was one of two facilitators, or “guides,” present to supervise the experience. Priest told me that, before he took the blue capsule that Richards offered him in an incense burner shaped like a chalice, he admitted to feeling nervous. He couldn’t recall exactly what Richards said in response, but he remembered the message that he received: You should be nervous. You’re about to meet God.